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# Beyond Disciplinarity: Reflections on the Study of Religion in International Development

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## Abstract

The increasing public role of religion in Sub-Saharan Africa and the consequent studies that are emerging on the topic, force us to rethink how to interpret, approach, categorize and understand religion in the public. The pervasiveness of religion, and the impossibility of simply inscribing it within a single discipline pushes us to reconsider our approaches, methodologies and theories. Focusing on the emergence of 'Religion and Development' (RaD) as a sub-discipline within the discipline of Development Studies, the article will show how the creation of 'focused transdisciplinarity', embedded in critical social science, can be an answer to the need of engaging with the multilayered nature of religion without compromising rigor and while still benefiting from methodologies and theories developed within a defined discipline. The article argues that a 'focused transdisciplinary approach' allows research to navigate complexity and engage with issues while constantly reminding us of the origins of the investigative process in which the study is conducted.

## Key words

Religion, Trans-disciplinarity, International Development, Development Studies, Religion and Development

## 1. Introduction

The study of religion is not a simple matter. As Mudimbe phrased it, there are risks in studying the complex domains of religion and the religious, especially for agnostics and especially when the objective of the research is not the religious system per se and its theological underpinning, but its relation and influence in the public sphere and everyday life.<sup>1</sup> Against the dominant Western-centric, modernist assumption that religion was destined to disappear from the public sphere in contemporary societies,<sup>2</sup> religion in many countries, especially in the Global South, is preponderantly returning as a reservoir of cultural autonomy, political imagination as well as of moral authority that influences public policies, social behavior and politics. Depending upon how we identify it what we see as the religious may reach into virtually every corner of human activity making the study of religion not a discipline and religion not a subject but a complex cross- and trans-disciplinary matter. In my own experience, working on religion and its public manifestations in Southern and East Africa, this meant dealing with issues embedded in politics, public policy, development, migration, human and civic rights, democracy, empowerment, wellbeing and economics. Most recently the study of religion brought me to investigate its interconnections with sexuality and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) activism in terms of public policies and development interventions for sexual minorities in Uganda. In all these cases, religion was a valuable

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<sup>1</sup> Mudimbe, *Tales of Faith*, 1997, p.1

<sup>2</sup> Deneulin with Bano, *Religion in Development*, 2009.

lens through which it was possible to understand changes, worldviews, and cause-effect dynamics from a human and social perspective.

The multi-dimensional and multi-layered nature of religion opens up several challenges to researchers and students who embark on this kind of study. Whilst this is actually an opportune moment for the study of religion in the public and publications on the topic are mushrooming, academic venues do not still encourage lively debate amongst disciplines and comparative approaches as much as they could. The study of religion, in fact, is still very fragmented and discipline-based. Too often academics stay in their disciplinary comfort zones and areas of interest and while those from outside religious studies are starting to recognize the value of religion, they tend to diminishingly introduce it as a variable or caveat to already existing theories and methodologies without challenging their existing system of knowledge. For example, since 9/11 religion has acquired an important role in political sciences and international relations, but the literature that has been produced on the role of religion in the political sphere mostly aimed to untangle the negative potentialities of religion as a generator of conflict and generally focused on fundamental expressions of religiosity.<sup>3</sup> The complexity domain of religion and its interconnectiveness with many aspects of the political life and political participation sadly have not been sufficiently explored. This approach suffers from the influence of two intellectual traditions embedded in the academic system: one is the discipline-based approach and the other one is the influence that secular theories, and suspiciousness, have had on the study of public religion for a long time. Within the practice of international development – of affecting social change and economic growth with the aim of alleviating poverty and engendering progress - we can see parallels, of narrow definitions of ‘development’ and how it should be studied, and of an approach imbued with the inevitability of secularisation.

While this is an extraordinary and flourishing moment for the study of this subject, it is also true that deep reflection is needed in order to understand where we are coming from and how to move forward. This reemergence forces us to rethink how to interpret, approach, categorize and understand religion in the public especially in contexts, like Sub-Saharan Africa, in which religion permeates public life. The pervasiveness of religion, and the impossibility of simply inscribing it within a single discipline pushes us to reconsider our approaches, methodologies and theories. In short, we are dealing with a complex moment and complicated issues that transcend our old ways of thinking and understanding. In order to navigate this complexity, we will need to move beyond old ways of thinking and approach and cross-disciplinary boundaries in the study of religion in the public. However, cross-boundary approaches can be tortuous, challenging and may not always be sufficient. There are many reasons for this: for example the lack of an institutional culture that facilitates collaboration and discussion among disciplines and between institutions, ‘crystalized’ ways of publishing

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<sup>3</sup> See Roy, *Globalized Islam*, 2004; Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam*, 2007; Mamdani *Good Muslims*, 2004; Fetzter & Soper, *Muslims and the State*, 2005; Stout, *Science & Technology*, 2004, Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind*, 2000.

in discipline-based journals, or framing development through narrow lenses, and the to the risk and fear of losing methodological, evidential, conceptual and theoretical rigor provided by the safe boundaries of singular academic fields and approaches.

This article will use the emergence of 'Religion and Development' (RaD) as a sub-discipline within the discipline of Development Studies to show that the creation of what I will call 'focused transdisciplinarity', embedded in critical social science, can be an answer to the need of engaging with the multilayered nature of religion without compromising rigor and while still benefiting from methodologies and theories developed within a defined discipline. In doing so the article will first provide an analysis of current limitations in research that crosses disciplines; it will reflect on parallels between academia and international development that have tended to undermine cross-disciplinary approaches, in particular highlighting ways and reasons why religion has been excluded from both development as a process and development studies as a discipline for several decades; it then will offer an understanding of the practical and theoretical reasons of its reintroduction to the point that a new sub-discipline, RaD, has been created and it will discuss how this emerging field (or sub-field) has been successful in using a transdisciplinary approach in order to understand the role of religion in affecting social-change and the implementation of development projects. The article argues that a 'focused transdisciplinary approach' allows research to navigate complexity and engage with issues while constantly reminding us of the origins of the investigative process in which the study is conducted.

## **2. Problematising Cross-disciplinary Approaches**

Bernard Choi and Anita Pak offer an exhaustive review concerning disciplinary boundary crossing and the use of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity.<sup>4</sup> They defined the prefixes defining multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinary as 'additive, interactive, and holistic, respectively'<sup>5</sup>. In their work multidisciplinary is described as knowledge that draws from different disciplines but stays within constituent boundaries. Multidisciplinary implies that individuals work very largely within their own discipline in collaborations which consist of people who are each knowledgeable and experienced in their own discipline. The second approach is interdisciplinarity, a means of analyzing and synthesizing links between disciplines into a coherent whole. Interdisciplinarity implies a direct interaction between the disciplines, with researchers being knowledgeable and rooted within more than one discipline. This approach has been attacked by critics who do not consider it possible to own these multiple knowledges but at the same time it is always possible to assert that to a certain extent it is possible to work from a base which is principally associated with one discipline, with subsidiary expertise in some areas. As

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<sup>4</sup> Choi & Pak, *Multidisciplinarity*, 2006; See Alvargonzalez, "Multidisciplinarity, Interdisciplinarity, Transdisciplinarity, and the Sciences", 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Choi & Pak, *Multidisciplinarity*, 2006, p. 351.

the Latin prefix *in-* infers, transdisciplinarity concerns transcending the disciplines, travelling across and through the different disciplines, and therefore beyond each individual one. Transdisciplinarity integrates the natural, social and health sciences in a humanities context, and transcends their traditional boundaries. Transdisciplinarity is transcending, transgressing, and transforming, it is theoretical, critical, integrative, and restructuring but, as a consequence of that, it is also broader and more exogenous.<sup>6</sup> Transdisciplinarity 'denotes integration' so that the totality of the transdisciplinary study would, presumably, then be greater than the sum of the parts.<sup>7</sup>

Historically there is a deep-set tradition of approaching knowledge through disciplinarity. With the emergence of a kaleidoscope of paradigms, fields and subfields, methods and theories in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Western Europe, unity of knowledge has been fragmented, ordered, and subsequently lost. The growth of science and scientific institutions has led to the fragmentation of academic fields, and consequently academics, from each other. In a defined discipline academics make use of particular methods to answer a set of questions in order to produce a body of knowledge. Academics in a discipline tend to share terminology, epistemological and ontological assumptions; though these elements may be an implicit rather than explicit part of the discipline. This approach influenced also the way institutions have been organized and conceptualized. The organization of research in the UK and in Europe has traditionally favored a single discipline approach. Until a few years ago, for example, applications to the major UK Research Councils required the insertion of the project within a specific discipline and they did not provide multiple fields and cross-disciplines options. Although, the mono-disciplinary heritage is still dominant, there have been major efforts to transcend disciplinary boundaries with cross-council research investments in the late 90s.<sup>8</sup> There is a growing recognition that publically-funded research needs to be translational, of direct benefit to society and societal outcomes, and there is an acknowledgement that cross-disciplinary approaches are more likely to do this. Nevertheless, disciplinarity is still hard-wired into institutions, training and journals, to a greater extent.

Despite the problems of coordinating across the UK's seven publically funded research Councils, that cover everything from the arts and humanities through to the physical and biological sciences, there have been some notable attempts to encourage new approaches. The Research Council UK (RCUK) was set up to promote activities that involve some or all of the Research Councils. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has put particular attention to interdisciplinarity research as a means for dealing with complex social challenges. Initiated by the idea that complex problems necessitate

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<sup>6</sup> Klein, "A Taxonomy", 2010, p.16.

<sup>7</sup> Bergström & Molteberg, "Common Discourse", 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Lyall et al, *Interdisciplinary Research*, 2011, p. 142. Many of the European Union's research activities are conducted under the European Commission Framework programmes. One of the main targets of these programmes is to facilitate and promote collaboration between different disciplines both within and between the social and natural sciences.

complex solutions, this new approach has been adopted in order to create synergies across disciplines towards tackling society's most pressing global challenges. Of particular relevance to the topic of this article was the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and ESRC jointly funded research group for the study of 'Religion and Society'.<sup>9</sup> This programme, based in Lancaster University, has funded 75 separate research projects, since 2007.

While we can see that organisations and programmes are putting more emphasis on and encouraging multi and inter-disciplinary approaches, change happens slowly. Truly crossing boundaries is more than a simple case of passing from an academic field to another one while strategically extracting a bit of information, some theory and a few methods from a discipline and another. Overall the dominant impression is that a cohesive approach that brings together specialists from different disciplines and intellectual traditions is still lacking. This is due to a set of operational (and philosophical) issues. Academic subcultures from different disciplines do not have much in common in their language, methods and daily problems, and people are still primarily defined and valued by their 'home' disciplinary work. 'Academic tribes', as defined by Tony Becher<sup>10</sup>, are unified by the cultural identity and symbolism of a specific discipline: 'the tribes of academe define their own identities and defend their own patches of intellectual ground by employing a variety of devices geared to the exclusion of illegal immigrants'. According to Becher in order to be admitted to a particular field it is necessary to adhere to the norms and manifest loyalty to a particular collegial group. Scholarly organisations, degree programmes, journals and books perpetuate the work and assumptions of the discipline.

Institutionally, universities remain structured and function, organizationally, within disciplines. It remains difficult to bring together academics from different colleges, schools, disciplines and fields. For example researchers with a multidisciplinary approach are still discouraged to submit articles in discipline-based journals (still the majority of academic journals) and when this happens researchers are requested to better clarify their field and their engagement with the specialized literature. As things stand, institutions and people are not used to think and work cross boundaries, and institutional and professional norms serve to strengthen disciplinary boundaries.

Science policymakers clearly recognize the need for change, as the nascent attempts to promote cross-disciplinary research in the UK and EU demonstrate. Gibbons et al created a typology of 'mode 1' and 'mode 2' institutions, where mode 1 institutions have disciplines as the locus of new knowledge production and scientific recognition, the institutional structure is homogenous and hierarchical, research is initiated by the research and evaluated through peer-review, and where academic journals remain the primary mode of distribution.<sup>11</sup> Gibbons and his colleagues go on to posit the need for

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<sup>9</sup> Online resource: <http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/>

<sup>10</sup> Becher, *Academic Tribes*, 1989, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Gibbons et al, *The New Production of Knowledge*, 1994.

mode 2 institutions, where problem solving is the main objective, teams of research are heterogeneous and unstable (in the sense they change and evolve depending on the problem being tackled), research is multidisciplinary and understood in local contexts, and knowledge diffusion is de-institutionalised in the sense it is created specifically for audiences outside of academia. While this typology represents two extremes, most universities can be categorized as solidly mode 1, with perhaps some mode 2 activities. There is clearly a need for greater societal engagement and more direct problem solving, a la mode 2, but there is much institutional, disciplinary and professional inertia that needs to be overcome.

Turning towards the study of religion, for a long time academia relegated anything that was related to religion in the public to the so-called field of religious studies<sup>12</sup>. However, religious studies, more than a discipline per se, remains a multidisciplinary umbrella area of studies, a platform that involves different, discrete disciplines rather than being a discipline per se. While religious studies draws on anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, and other disciplines, to some extent has been dominated by the history of religions. In a certain way, religious studies as a field has failed to practice 'true trans-disciplinarity' in which methods and insights were cohesively integrated and most of all religious studies, with a clear focus on the history and philosophy of religion, is not well suited to successfully address and understand rapid and contested social changes like those occurring in rapidly changing African contexts. What we are searching for now in approaching the study of religion in Africa, is something that goes beyond the eclectic but unintegrated approach of religious studies, and seeks an engagement with several disciplines and develops the means to transcend them.

In the study of religion multidisciplinary is insufficient or not always the solution when complex multi-layered issues need to be explored and understood through a dialogue and interaction that multidisciplinary approaches only partially provide. It is important to bridge boundaries between multiple disciplines but at the same time it is important that in doing so the theoretical and analytical power of those constituent disciplines are not weakened with the inclusion of too many methods, theories and concepts. In short, trans-disciplinarity is invoked and necessary in the study of religion, but we need to be aware of the risks that this approach implies. A reflection on Religion and Development (RaD) can provide a good lesson on how to break boundaries without losing connection with a discipline.

### **3. Interdisciplinarity: From International Development to Development Studies**

The field of international development has historically exhibited many of the characteristics that define the disciplinary-bound approaches of academia. In many ways this is not surprising; modern international development is really a product of the

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<sup>12</sup> Religious Studies emerged in the 60s as an attempt to study religion away from the confessional nature of theology and the reductionist approach promoted by the social sciences.

immediate aftermath of World War II and then the Cold War. The ethos was of taking the knowledge of the West, produced as it was in universities, and applying it globally, as we can see in US President Harry Truman's 1949 Inaugural Address, which many take to the defining point of modern international development: 'We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped area [...] For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and skill to relieve the suffering of these people'.<sup>13</sup> This idea of the simple translation of knowledge from one place and context to another fundamentally shaped present day development institutions such as the United Nations, World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The post-World War II project of development was conceived of by academics (mainly economists like Maynard Keynes and Rostow), the key development institutions were proposed by them, and they played an extremely influential role in setting and shaping the agenda for development. Alongside and within these institutions we can see the development of a single discipline that would dominate international development for decades, that of the development economist,<sup>14</sup> whose job would be to translate approaches from richer western countries and implement them in the poorer South.<sup>15</sup>

This narrowing of the focus of international development, through the lens of development economics and concerned primarily with unproblematically implementing knowledge from one context to the other has dominated the field until relatively recently. As mentioned in the introduction, there are many parallels with the barriers that restrict cross-disciplinary approaches in academia; international institutions that favoured one disciplinary approach above all others, institutions that bred a professional class of experts trained to engage with each other, a focus on scientific and technical approaches that could be replicated and easily quantified, and a strong relationship with the most bounded academic disciplines such as economics or the biological sciences (witnessed in projects such as plant breeding). The focus was very much on scientific, economic and technical solutions. Politics, culture and religion were not considered important, and this was the case to a greater or lesser degree until relatively recently. For example, so-called Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), widely implemented in Africa and Latin America to modernize countries' economies in the 1990s have been widely criticized because they failed to think through the social, wellbeing and health consequences of their associated neoliberal economic policies as well for their failure in understanding the context and its complexity.

Even up until 2000, with the launch of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were designed to increase commitments to development assistance and coordinate activities, there has been a relatively narrow developmental focus. The eight

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<sup>13</sup> President Harry Truman, Inaugural Address, Point Four Programme, Thursday, January 20, 1949.

<sup>14</sup> Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Rostow, *Stages of Economic Growth*, 1960.



goals<sup>16</sup>, focusing on issues such as alleviating poverty and food insecurity, improving access to education and healthcare when taken together could provide a holistic way of thinking about international development. What has tended to happen is that each goal has been seen in isolation as a means to set specific targets. For example, focusing on HIV/Aids and malaria has meant funding 'vertical programmes' in developing countries that engage solely with those diseases, rather than funding health systems more broadly. Likewise, improving access to primary education as a target has often distributed funding away from secondary and tertiary education, which may not be the best developmental outcome for a country. The MDGs have been successful in raising the profile and commitment to development, but have tended to create top-down 'disciplinary' siloes of their own.<sup>17</sup>

The narrow focus on economics and technical solutions had its critiques, and indeed developmental progress has been much slower and more disappointing than its adherents had anticipated. The two biggest contentions were that the overly narrow, top-down, economic and technical approach to international development did not engage with local political, cultural, environmental and *religious* realities, and that there was no meaningful engagement with the countries and communities who were the object of development. This combination meant that development interventions were often not nuanced or holistic enough for local contexts, or were flat out reflected or not adopted by the targets of the interventions.<sup>18</sup>

This is the context in which the discipline of 'development studies' emerged, as an inter-disciplinary field that encompassed far more than development economics in order to critically engage with the failings of international development, ideally in dialogue with the policymakers, practitioners and professionals responsible for implementing programmes and projects. Development studies essentially emerged in opposition to the narrow disciplinarity of development. Development studies argued that politics, power, culture and context needed to be incorporated into development, and that in order to do this it was not possible to conceive development narrowly or as a linear process and it was not feasible that development professionals could understand this complexity in isolation from the people requiring assistance themselves. The notion of 'bottom up' development and engagement was a key early motif, asserting that poor people themselves were most expert about their situation and needed to be engaged with at every stage of development project planning and implementation. To accept this approach would mean that development professionals would have to accept being challenged in their authority and understand their solutions may not be the best ones.<sup>19</sup> From this perspective, long ignored disciplines such as social anthropology, political science and rural sociology would become central to the development process, and this provided the basis for development studies to engage across multiple other disciplines.

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<sup>16</sup> Online resource: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>

<sup>17</sup> Smith, *Science and Technology*, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Easterly, *White Man's Burden*, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Chambers, *Challenging the Professions*, 1993.

Since the 90s Development Studies has pushed for a process of critical reconsideration within international development and the parallel critiques that emerged produced alternative visions and conceptualisations of development and wellbeing that moved away from the previous focus on economic growth. Particularly influential has been the human-centred approach, based on the analysis of Amartya Sen and his multi-faced 'capability approach', which has enabled different organisations and actors to generate their own perspectives of development and in turn to provide alternative ways of intervening, delivering services and organising politics and social relationships in given communities in the short as well as in the long term.<sup>20</sup> Alongside this perspective, the notion of 'social capital', of the importance of social relations in building resilient communities has gained traction within development agencies.<sup>21</sup> These approaches are radical in relation to the previous economic growth centred models, explicitly suggesting development is far more complex and multi-layered, and implicitly acknowledging religion cannot be ignored.

While International Development continues to struggle to meet all its targets and poverty proves intractable there has been positive change. Amartya Sen's approach has been influential, leading to the World Bank to conduct 60,000 interviews in 60 countries to capture the wants and aspirations of poor people. These findings, published in the *Voices of the Poor* report in 2000 and in 2002, showed that religious leaders in poor communities were trusted at a higher degree than anyone else, that religious organisations were important in providing development assistance and that beliefs and religion were extremely relevant in defining progress, development and empowerment in people's everyday life.<sup>22</sup> In short, the relevance of religion could not be denied and international development, prompted by people working within development studies, has had to start to think of new ways of engaging with religion both at a theoretical and at a methodological level. It is within this process of reconsideration and new developments that we can discern the genesis of Religion and Development as a sub-discipline.

### **3. Beyond Secularization Theory, towards Religion and Development**

Despite the emergence from the 1970s onwards of a more critically engaged, cross-disciplinary approach to Development Studies that has had some influence on the practice of International Development itself in recognizing culture, context and local aspirations, religion has remained relatively ignored by development studies and by international development until more recently. Since the Enlightenment the study of religion in the public and the energies used towards knowledge production in this matter, have been strongly influenced by the dominant secular assumption that religion was not relevant in understanding societies, social-political relations and social change. This powerful assumption fomented suspicions towards this kind of study. Although in

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<sup>20</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Fine, *Theories of Social Capital*, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> World Bank, *Can Anyone Hear Us?*, 2000.

the past two decades social sciences have started to challenge secular theories and recognise the value of religion in the public sphere, the power of this intellectual tradition has not completely faded away and in some way it still affecting our way of approaching public religion, especially with regard to its engagement – or not – with international development. In order to understand why this is so it is instructive to scan back through the history of the west's relationship with religion, and then engage again with the post-World War II conception of international development and progress described above. Starting from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the history of the West is a history of disenchantment (as Max Weber would say)<sup>23</sup> and liberation from religion and religious authorities and their influence on public, political and economic spaces. This meant allowing religion to exist only in the private and personal sphere while dismantling its power in society and through its institutions. Modernity in 20<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe came to be seen as progress from a deeply religious, irrational and non-bureaucratic world, to a modern world in which material advancement was achieved through 'sound' bureaucratic structures which led to secularisation and the loss of the spiritual. And while the Enlightenment was fighting to rid itself of God in the public sphere, academic studies started to give less weight to the study of religion as a lens to understand reality and the contemporary.

In the post-World War II period of internationalisation briefly described above, international development *de facto* ignored faith while favouring 'enlightened rationality'. 'Unreasonable faith' had no place within development narratives. This is largely due to a mix of fear and suspicion on the part of the emerging secular development institutions and professionals that religion was either unimportant or worse might be the source of conflict and a break to rationality. And after all, religion ought to be a private matter for 'modern' citizens and not a vehicle to understand and influence society and social changes (as was perceived to be the case in the West). Therefore, not much attention was paid to religion in society and the role that religious organisations and religious beliefs could play in the lives of people. For decades, faith in secular development stated that if people followed a certain path, the Western path of modernisation and secularisation, this would lead to economic growth and to wealth for less developed countries. For example, at the end of colonisation in the 50s and in the 60s, Africa was expected to shape its newly independent states and societies around the Western model. Literature from this period that dealt with religion in the continent, gives a sense that there was little left to study, and little need to do so, as Africa was inevitably going to follow a Western path of modernisation. So powerful was this discourse that more recent analyses highlighting the enduring reality of religion have simply been portrayed as a negation, or a deviation, from a so-called Western normality.<sup>24</sup> International development largely ignored politics, culture and context, until prompted through critical development studies to confront its own failings and weaknesses. Despite evidence to the contrary, as evidenced in studies such as the World

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<sup>23</sup> Weber M. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge, 1997 (original publication in 1905).

<sup>24</sup> Mbembe, *On the Post-colony*, 2001.

Bank's *Voices of the Poor* Report religion was to remain ignored for longer, obscured by Western intellectual tradition that continued to exert influence on development intervention and critical analysis alike.<sup>25</sup> It is only in the last 5-10 years we can talk of the emergence of Religion and Development as a critical cross-disciplinary approach, that is beginning to exert intellectual and practical influence.

#### **4. The Emergence of RaD as a Trans-disciplinary Approach**

The emergence of Religion and Development (RaD), as an academic field, is a particular case. As discussed, theory suggested that religion, as a dynamic destined to lose practical value in the public and therefore relegated to the private sphere, was not seen as relevant in understanding local contexts and facilitating social change and that development actors were not supposed to deal with religions and their multiple representations of values, beliefs, rituals, institutions and leaders. However, in the field practitioners and development organisations were experiencing something very different. For those undertaking research and development work in Africa it was impossible not to observe a reality contrasting predictions of a pre-defined vision of modernity.<sup>26</sup> Religion-driven charitable contributions<sup>27</sup> have been and remain a critical source of welfare and religious organisations remain the most significant non-state providers of basic social services to the poor in Africa. Faith-based organisations (FBOs) expanded or proliferated as a result of economic neo-liberalism as the faithful responded to growing poverty, inequality and social exclusion. An array of religious organisations have become obliged to deliver development.<sup>28</sup> For example FBOs are a major source of funding for HIV/Aids treatment and programmes, due to their capacity to fundraise from both religious and secular networks in developed countries.<sup>29</sup>

As a consequence of the development narrative of failure and misunderstandings in which development interventions did not work and theories were not reflected in practice, religion has started to be considered and introduced as a valuable variable. In 1980 the editors of a special *World Development* issue entitled 'Religion and Development' argued that the 'discrepancy between the reality of previously colonized countries on the one hand and the aspirations of a development project modeled on processes that had occurred in the colonizing societies on the other called for a re-evaluation of the relationships between development and religion'.<sup>30</sup> However, their plea was not successful until later on when in 1998 James Wolfensohn, then president of the World Bank and the then-Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey founded a 'World Faiths Development Dialogue Forum' to promote dialogue between

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<sup>25</sup> World Bank, *Can Anyone Hear Us?*, 2000.

<sup>26</sup> Bompani, "Religion and Development from Below", 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Many religious organisations that operate in developing countries are not easily defined because they constitute small and volatile realities, like churches, mosques, interfaith groups that change according to many factors, like for example the role played by the leadership and the local political context.

<sup>28</sup> Tyndale, *Visions of Development*, 2006; Marshall & Van Saanen, *Development and Faith*, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> ARHAP, "Appreciating Assets", 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Wilber & Jameson, *Religious Values*, 1980, p. 6.

religious groups, and between the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (now the Forum has been replaced by the smaller 'Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics' group).

Looking ahead toward the third millennium, Wolfenshon started a public discussion within the World Bank that could have changed the nature of many development interventions and shaped the way faith-inspired development organizations would be approached and, involved (and funded) within the broader 'secular' development enterprise. The then World Bank director's initiative was inspired by an initial analysis of religious organisations as prolific health distributors in the Global South and by a critique to development interventions' failures and the limitation of structural adjustments in previous years. However, when Wolfensohn proposed to start a discussion on religion and the importance of religion for development, none out of the 24 executive directors agreed with his proposal. Katherine Marshall<sup>31</sup> described these very first meetings as 'very complicated', a 'long difficult path' and 'full of suspicion'. Slowly incorporating religion into development (both studies and practice) would be a watershed that required new ways of understanding and analyzing development. When religion came into discussion with international development it was obvious that there were operational and epistemological problems to deal with. Firstly there was an issue of trust and suspicion. Secular development had for decades considered religion as a veneer of contrast and conflict and the promoter of irrational action more than a possible ally in tackling poverty and injustice. Secondly there was a deep knowledge gap. There were not many data on religious organizations and on religious values available in promoting development. Religions are many, they change and transform. In short religion was complex and difficult to work with. This was an important area that development studies has not yet worked in systematically.

Nonetheless the disappointing conclusion of the World Bank's initiative signposted the beginning of a new phase of investigation and gave rise to a set of studies on the changes of religious values as economies develop – many of which have been able to make use of substantial new data sets on religious affiliation and beliefs. Since the end of the 1990s, development and religion are no longer contrasting worlds, with the former no longer seeing the latter as an archaic, non-progressive agent of change in contraposition to modernist progressive linear idea of 'secular' development. For example, the UN 2004 Human Development Report tackled the social and political management of culturally and religiously diverse societies. In advocating multicultural policies to achieve 'living mode' and 'participation' inclusion, it argued that attempts to suppress cultural diversity are morally wrong and likely to exacerbate conflict, and highlighted a variety of mechanisms available to governments for ensuring that the rights of different cultural and religious groups are recognized, their needs reflected in

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<sup>31</sup> Katherine Marshall's lecture, 'Development and Religious Actors: The State of Play', Princeton University, 26 October 2009. Online resource: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vtZCwlZ5ms>

Katherine Marshall is a senior fellow at Georgetown University, Berkley Centre for Religion, Peace and World Affairs and has served as senior advisor for the World Bank.

political decision making and their access to public resources guaranteed.<sup>32</sup> In 2005 a research centre for the study of Religion and Development, funded by the UK Department for International Development, has started at the University of Birmingham<sup>33</sup>. The number of publications on Religion and Development has increased considerably in the last ten years.<sup>34</sup> The World Bank has since 2000 had a unit that promotes research and dialogue between faith, ethics, and service delivery. And many international development actors, such as, DFID, the World Bank, SIDA and various UN agencies, have formed partnerships with faith communities to achieve the Millennium Development Goals<sup>35</sup> while discussion on what will replace the MDGs when they end in 2015 now includes the role of religion as a key dynamic.

The emergent sub-discipline of Religion and Development was born out of the need to develop concepts and analytical tools, along with theoretical frameworks, that would help with our understanding of the role of religion in affecting people's behaviour and decisions. This is not to say that emergence of RaD has not been problematic and without limitations. These recent acknowledgements of the importance of religious organisations in Africa, however, are still in a nascent phase and they are still largely understudied and under-theorised. For example Development Studies continues to struggle to appropriate languages and methodologies that are not familiar to the discipline. Although religion gained space inside the development field, old secular suspicions and the desire to 'rationalise' and 'secularize' religion remains strong. In fact while much development scholarship tends to focus on constructing categories to define religious organisations in development and trying to come up with functional clear typologies of good and bad organisations (using labels such as 'terrorist' and 'ideological') still struggle to engage with more intangible categories like beliefs, symbols, rituals and invisible powers. Engaging with religion and its material and immaterial power is very challenging, especially from the perspective of the materiality and 'progress' of development.

Furthermore, translating 'esoteric knowledge' to non-experts and communicating findings based on religious interpretations to 'secular' development studies audiences is not always an easy task. Religious organisations, leaders' voices, values and ideas may affect each aspect of life. But how can we bring all these aspects in dialogue with each other?

My recent research project on Sexuality, Politics and Religion in Uganda for example<sup>36</sup> started with an analysis of Pentecostal churches in the capital Kampala and

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<sup>32</sup> UNDP, "Human Development Report", 2004.

<sup>33</sup> The Religion and Development Programme at the University of Birmingham is now closed. More information at: <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/government-society/departments/international-development/research/projects/religions-development.aspx>

<sup>34</sup> For example see Clarke, "Faith Matters", 2007; Clarke et al., *Development and Civil Society*, 2008; Deneulin with Bano *Religion in Development*, 2009; Haynes, *Religion and Development: Conflict or Cooperation?*, 2007; Lunn, "The Role of Religion", 2009; Tyndale, *Visions of Development*, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Deneulin & Rakodi, "Revisiting Religion", 2011, p. 45.

<sup>36</sup> Sexuality, Politics and Religion in Africa (SPRA), Leverhulme funded research project based at the Centre of African Studies, the University of Edinburgh.

the way their public voice was affecting political discourse around public morality and sexuality. The initial aim of the research was to examine how public discourses around sexuality and same-sex-relations were shaped and constructed in the country. The research project was originally framed as a socio-political analysis, but naturally turned towards unanticipated issues like health, civil and human rights and access to medicines. When I began to interview LGBTI organisations I found out how important religion was in affecting health interventions. As an LGBTI activist said: 'Religion is really affecting the life of LGBTI people. Doctors in clinics take religious and cultural beliefs into consideration in order to give a service. There are many cases of doctors who refuse to treat LGBTI people in the name of religion and traditional culture. They say that 'its not African culture and it is against the Bible so we do not treat you'.<sup>37</sup> This is in line with previous findings in South Africa, when I have been consulted by practitioners working in health organisations on matters of HIV prevention. Their main concern was to understand the reason and the way religious and traditional leaders were hindering NGOs' interventions through the promotion of religious healing and faith versus clinics, workshops run by medical specialists and condom distribution. Health workers in South African townships, in fact, have noticed that a few 'clients' come in for their appointments and hand back their ARVs, saying that they no longer need to take these 'as God is the better healer'(research notes, 2012). Their faith and trust in God will heal their HIV and they have stopped taking the medication.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore some leaders were saying that the use of condoms was against their 'tradition'. The understanding of similar problems require the engagement of disciplines and methodologies with each other. Issues of health, religion, beliefs, development and wellbeing were involved. Whilst the main development goal was to persuade 'clients' and leaders to support ARVs interventions and condom distribution as the most rationale and effective way of tackling a health problem; for local people, who were attending churches, mosques and monasteries, the need to observe and embrace beliefs that were promoting by religious leaders were impellent and concrete necessities. Religious leaders, on the other side, were promoting their way of interpreting sacred scripts and tradition. For the researcher there was an issue of rendering everyday politics, while engaging with health, theology, and social change - always in order to understand how to improve and implement development interventions. This meant going beyond a simple multidisciplinary approach, but instead exploring and transcending disciplines, whilst always remaining within the broad rubric of development studies, with its continual critical engage of what development is, what is should be, and who decides and shapes the former and the latter. Reality, as well as knowledge, was transcending boundaries of the sacred and material worlds and it was difficult to articulate the relevance of religious beliefs through the secular language and practices of international development in, for example, acknowledging the value of praying to 'secular' medical doctors. The fluidity of boundaries between fields of practice and research are a daily reality, something that we have been ignored in

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with Brian, LGBTI activist, Kampala, 31 January 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Discussion with *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) researcher, December 2012.

modern times as development remained narrowly-focused as practitioners felt that was most effective and disciplines became more distinct in practice as scholars assumed that they needed to so.

How can a researcher render the value of praying and believing to scientists and development practitioners? How can one insert the value of songs, prayers and rituals into development practice and analysis? It is a matter of trying to understand, articulate and reformulate the meanings of these events and to make the experiences of the members of the churches understandable to those who are external to their religious and socio-cultural context. In this sense I perceive the work of a researcher who study religion as a passage from 'etic' (an external) to 'emic' (attempt to look and participate as an internal) and from there again to 'etic' but with the knowledge gained in the process. Borrowing the terminology from linguistic analysis it is possible to talk of 'emic' terms, that means the point of view of the internal actors (in this case members of the church community) and 'etic' the external point of view that in more rationalised terms corresponds more closely to a Western secular way of searching for objective truth. Emic correspond to an approach that allowed the researcher to analyse the believers in the way they would like to be investigated, trying (when it is possible) to suspend predefined judgments. An 'emic' approach should take into consideration the holistic interpretation to life offered by religious communities. In this context religion is not a sphere separated from the political, social and economic environment. Health, political, economic and everyday issues fully enter into the religious discourse and the religious rituals.

The study of religion calls for an engagement among disciplines, and for moving beyond disciplines but there is also the need to maintain a well defined intellectual framework and method of investigations. Trans-disciplinarity, and the integration and transformation of disciplines that implies, risks involving too much, almost everything, and in doing so losing focus, method and analytical power. As religion is something that potentially crosses every sphere of human activity, a broad and inclusive approach risks understanding nothing, without framework and focus.

This article argues that a 'focused transdisciplinary approach' allows research to navigate complexity while constantly reminding us of the origins of the investigative process in which the study is conducted. The nascent discipline (or rather sub-discipline) of Religion and Development is evidence of the notion that trans-disciplinarity works well when it is quite narrow and focused. In order to understand and implement development, groups of scholars and practitioners are together and apart trying to rethink the role and explanatory power of religion using different disciplines and trying to understand and explain complexity and offer solutions to complex situations. Disciplines are important but there is always a risk that those rest in their comfort zones, bound by their disciplinary roots 'whilst destructively competing for more dominant profiles, or asking research questions that are too abstracted from



real world development challenges'.<sup>39</sup> Transdisciplinarity is difficult and in some way slippery because there is a risk of losing focus. However, a focused transdisciplinary approach that maintains and values engagement with the main discipline's rubric, focus and ideals allow us to have a 'home' discipline through which we can engage, learn and communicate with the 'others', much as development studies has begun to do successfully with international development actors over the past two or so decades.

## 5. Conclusion

Academia and development practice have long exhibited parallels regarding disciplinary narrowness, reinforced institutionally, intellectually and professionally. Relatively recently, after several decades of post-World War Two development, the emergence of interdisciplinary development studies has begun to break this impasse. Now we are also witnessing the emergence of Religion and Development as a distinct sub-section of development studies.

Religion and Development has emerged in the face of the complex interactions and seeming contradictions posed by pervasive and growing religiosity and decades of development interventions in the Global South. The old assumptions that the latter would naturally replace the former have not come to pass and this needed to be interrogated and understood. Furthermore, religion and development implicitly seeks to provide answers and practical solutions to practical problems, primarily through developing a much more nuanced and holistic understanding of the complex interactions between religion and religious practice, and international development, in terms of practical interventions and how it conceptualizes what development ought to be. Practitioners and donors unsure of how to deal with a reservoir of social capital and organisations motivated by religious beliefs are increasingly encouraging academics to reflect and engage with disciplines such as health, economics, politics and gender studies in order to produce practical solutions for development projects.

Studies that research beyond and challenges disciplines, by no means an easy option, may hold more promise in the long run, if we are to truly understand and engage with the relationship between religion and development. This article has highlighted the impossibility of inscribing religion into a discipline – especially in the context of the parameters of international development – and has suggested the need to better promote trans-disciplinary methods for the study of this matter. It has also sought to highlight some of the complications and limitations of undertaking research of this nature that crosses disciplinary boundaries. While one may intuitively see the value in transdisciplinary approaches, it is also true that it is by no means easy to move outside of one's familiar disciplinary frameworks, norms and values to try to actively think through research questions from perspectives with which one is considerably less familiar. The promotion and support of trans-disciplinary research is likely to require structural changes in our research institutions, as well as changes in the value placed on

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<sup>39</sup> Carr & MacLachlan, "Interdisciplinarity Research for Development", 2008, p.1.

discipline-based research more generally. Likewise, development institutions need to be further incentivised to engage with critical trans-disciplinary social science if there is to be strong engagement there.

The advantage of the ‘focused translational’ and ‘focused transdisciplinary’ approaches of RaD, is that it is able to draw directly on the broader set of analytical tools necessary to understand the religious and the material in the context of development and dynamic change, whilst remaining rooted in the tradition and avenues that development studies has managed to build up and use to shift the terms of the debate with international development actors. The engagement of multiple disciplines with religion in the context of rapid social, economic and political change will become even more relevant in Africa with its growing spirituality and increasingly influential role of public religion.<sup>40</sup>

Time is calling for the development of critical, engaged and trans-disciplinary epistemic communities, committed to nuanced, contextualized research and equipped to engage with the actors who are, or will be, shaping Africa’s future.

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<sup>40</sup> Pew Forum, “Tolerance and Tensions”, 2010.

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